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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the roles and responsibilities of the linguist in the English department and also the roles and responsibilities of the English department in relation to the linguist. Discussed are such topics as the exclusivity of some English departments, linguists. grievances against some English departments, linguists' expectations for professional advancement, the teaching conditions imposed by some English departments on linguists, and the difference between conditions imposed on linguists who work in English departments and linguists who work in linguistics departments. It is suggested that English departments review their treatment of linguists and that linguists examine their status within their departments and encourage fair treatment for both literacy and literature professors. (TS)

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THE ENGLISH LINGUIST AND THE REAL LINGUIST

Mary R. Miller

In the May 1974 issue of PMLA, Florence Howe has an excellent article entitled "Literacy and Literature." That literacy is a very important aspect of this partnership may be surmised by the order of the two nouns in the title. In examining the overall relationship of literacy and literature in English Departments, Howe finds the atmosphere in the usual English Department far from healthy. Her paper is a thoughtful assessment of the reasons English Departments are being charged with irrelevance, elitism, and atrophy. This charge is leveled not only at intellectual values in English Department research but also at curriculum. In particular, it is the charges against the curriculum which are connected with students leaving English Departments in great numbers. The charges have to do with direction, focus, and standards, charges which must be laid at the doorstep of those in control of English Departments.

Howe finds that the control of English Departments is firmly in the hands of a literary elite, with a hierarchy that begins at the top with the university professor of literature and works itself downward to lesser functionaries.

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There is a dichotomy between the prestigious professor of literature, with his snobbish claims to status and mystique on the one hand, and the other half of the profession, Howe's so-called literacy teacher. The literacy teacher, at no matter what educational institution he functions, belongs to the proletariat. To quote Howe, "they cannot be eliminated, but they can be overworked and paid badly." Presumably, they can be identified as teachers of freshman composition (including graduate assistants), teachers of advanced composition and expository writing, teachers of prescriptive grammar if any still exist, teachers of communications in community colleges, and a great many teachers in elementary and secondary school. All of these teachers are English teachers just as much as the professors of literature. Yet there is a seemingly irremediable gulf between the prestigious teacher of literature at university level who controls the university English Department, and the second-class citizen who teaches what Howe calls literacy.

Howe does not mention the English Department linguist, although he is a little noted and unsung member of nearly every English Department. Accreditation demands it. The English Department linguist would rarely think of himself as a teacher of literacy; yet his relative status easily

identifies him as a member of the proletariat. In the typical English Department literature is supreme, and that supremacy has its rewards. The other half of the dichotomy--not all of them linguists by any means--gets the scraps. Such punishment can range from promotions to parking permits, from salary to sociability, from grants to grades, and from policy to politics. In some English Departments it is not politic to be a linguist; it thwarts advancement.

First of all, the linguist is often pressured to alter his subject matter with the excuse that it should be made more relevant, although to quote Howe once more--"literature is merely one of several arts, none of particular significance except to fill leisure time or, in the words of an administrator I know, to expand 'intellectual horizons for personal gratification.'" Through lack of an understanding of what linguistics is all about, the linguist is expected to be the official keeper of "correct" grammar, the last resort of "usage," and the sentence diagramming expert <u>par excellence</u> on campus. Experience has taught a certain number of us that it does little if any good to protest that none of this is the subject matter of linguistics. It does even less good to try to react positively and explain what linguistics is. Thus, it may turn out that the department linguist is

pressed to please his uncomprehending superior by becoming the arbitrator of elegant expression and Latinate grammar. However, if he yields to departmental pressure, he may be haunted by the vision of Nelson Francis discussing the relationship of linguistics and language etiquette. One also can be haunted by a recent article in College English which, it seems to me, demolishes the case for teaching usage. In the April 1974 issue, Mary Vaiana Taylor found that graduate students teaching English composition not only could not agree among themselves as to what constituted "good usage" but also found that many of the excised examples occur in the works of major literary figures.

There are often pressures to make the history of the English language one more course in literature by eliminating all reference to sound changes, Verner and Grimm, the great vowel shift, case loss and word order, and devote class time exclusively to literary masterpieces. Most will agree that the highlights of humanistic education include the remembrance of truly unforgettable characters such as the Wife of Bath and Falstaff. Yet a literary course in this period does not preclude the necessity for understanding the language of this period, or exactly how it differs from modern English.

Moreover, linguistics has a lively interest in all nonstandard language manifestations, in literary style, in the internal and external history of the English language, and in composition. What the linguist may wish to do, however, is bring the fruits of recent research and learning to bear upon his subject matter. He may not wish to perpetrate old frauds upon his students through the teaching of inept, discredited, and old-fashioned subject matter.

The sometimes peculiar attitude of English Departments toward their solitary linguist can produce strange results. One such result is that of charlatanism. One English Department linguist I know speaks several foreign languages, makes a good appearance, and can give the impression of being very learned; but even the most superficial conversation will expose his complete lack of expertise in linguistics. Surely it was not the intent of the college to hire a fake; they simply lacked the information to appropriately evaluate applicants. The result is that they have a person from an Ivy League college with a degree in a field entirely unrelated to linguistics. This is, of course, most unfortunate for the reputation of the college and the student body.

The exclusivity of some English Departments, to which we have referred repeatedly, also produces other unhappy

results. A friend of mine, when he heard that I was going to write this paper, submitted a list of grievances. His department had, he charged, isolated him both physically and psychologically. He admitted that he did get his check, but he lacked all communication with other members of his department. His office was in another building, his mail was handled in an indifferent manner, and he was invited to English Department functions only when a contribution was needed. Otherwise they tried to forget that he was there. He hoped that his information would reach beyond the confines of his own profession, he said, to the ears of more sympathetic colleagues and open-minded administrators. When I asked him why he didn't leave, he confessed that his only other expertise was in pumping gas, and he was afraid that the gasoline shortage would return. He was an attractive young person with excellent credentials, yet he had learned in three years of academe that linguists could not be trusted to help formulate English Department policy, advise English Department students, or represent the English Department on any University committees. Linguists could sit on departmental committees, he found, especially in the role of recorder (the grammar would be right), if the committee was large enough to resoundingly beat back his motions. Exclusion, he complained, extended to decisions regarding what

linguistics courses should be offered, what their content should be, and even to their prerequisites.

Another linguist, a woman, had a departmental chairman who liked to meddle in textbook selection. He urged her to adopt the traditional grammar text written by an old friend in what was billed as a course in generative transformational theory. He passed off the protests of my colleague lightly, commenting goodnaturedly that grammar was grammar no matter what you called it. The linguist had the last word this time, however, for while she adopted the text, she made a point of telling her class that they would not be tested on it. I haven't received word yet as to whether or not she was granted tenure.

The enumerations above represent in a general way the situation of the English Department linguist, although it is far from complete. The examples have to do mostly with working conditions. Other matters have to do with a realistic appraisal of expectations for professional advancement. Since departmental advancement is dependent upon professional advancement, however, or we assume that it is, the two matters are inter-related. Sometimes it is mere thoughtlessness, lack of comprehension, or even personal greed for limited funds that may make it immeasurably more difficult for the English Department linguist to obtain travel funds, departmentally

approved university grants, or research and typing assistance. Yet the already isolated linguist needs these travel funds to keep his contacts with his colleagues in other places and to learn what is afoot in linguistics. Since linguistics is a turbulent, creative, swiftly-changing field, it is absolutely necessary to keep in touch. A year or two of banishment through lack of travel funds may make the linguist so completely out of date that he can never recuperate his loss. Moreover, it further isolates him in a department where there are no other linguists with whom to talk. Denials of grants make professional advancement more difficult. Although such deprivation may not result from malice, but rather from complete lack of understanding of the value of a research project, that is small consolation for the linguist. To this we may add that there is general incomprehension of scholarly work done by linguists when promotion time comes around. Publications which are not fully comprehended can scarcely be deemed important.

The professional advancement of the English Department linguist is additionally imperiled by the fact that he can never be anything but a generalist. Few linguists in English Departments ever have the opportunity to teach their specialty, or perhaps even to develop one. This is not the way to advance professionally. On the other hand, most literary

scholars can limit their teaching experience to a genre, period, or figure that is of special interest to them. Typically the English Department linguist must cover every area in which a linguistics course is offered. The matter of being expected to be a generalist can have its funny side also. Some of my literary colleagues were genuinely shocked to learn that I have no expertise in mathematical linguistics or in glossematics. To substitute any other two areas of linguistics would shock them no less. Linguistics is supposed to be a very limited area of endeavor, easily acquired in its entirety by anyone. Another somewhat parallel view is probably even more prevalent. That view is that linguistics consists of a single course known as English philology. That and traditional grammar are the stock in trade of the linguist.

This is by no means the end of the funny things that may befall the English Department linguist, but as we indicated above, most categories either relate to his discipline in the classroom, or to his professional standing and aspirations. The title of this paper is "The English Linguist and the Real Linguist," and by now you may be wondering whatever happened to the real linguist. Furthermore, you may have noticed that I never mention the English linguist, but only the English Department linguist. That has not been an oversight. My

experience has led me to note that linguists in English Departments do not always dedicate their professional lives exclusively to the English language. Often they also operate in areas which are peripheral to English, such as bilingualism and contrastive analysis, or American Indians, or black Americans and their language, or language acquisition, or English as a second language. Even more often, they may operate in fields which, while they apply to the English language specifically, nevertheless may have general theoretical implications for all languages, or else our claims on universals are out of line. In all such cases, knowledge of languages other than English and of other linguistic situations is far preferable, it seems to me, to a narrow background based solely on knowledge of the English language. One cannot truly appreciate the English language until one can compare it with other languages. Besides, linguistics in the English Department often serves, as it does in my case, not only students in my own department, but those in education, reading, urban studies, American studies, women's studies, TESOL, speech, journalism, and foreign language.

Now what about the real linguist? Does he exist only in linguistics departments? Is he better trained than his colleague in the English Department? Are his courses more

truly linguistic, more exclusive, better organized, better attended, and perhaps most important of all--better as preparation for graduate study in linguistics? If the answer to all or even one of these questions is yes, then the English Department linguist serves the same purpose in life that my charlatan friend with the Ph. D. in something not linguistics does in his post: that of fake! Every English Department linguist should have the same training, the same specializations, the same background, the same research potential, and the same scholarly interests as some of his counterparts in linguistics departments. But this is not the difficult part; this only requires hiring a person with the proper credentials--something we assume often occurs. The crisis occurs after the linguist is hired. To remain a real linguist in an unfriendly or outright hostile English Department, if you are so unfortunate as to find that your lot, is not nearly so easy. For that reason, considerable time has been spent in enumerating the pitfalls of this situation and offering the consolation that your problems are not unique. Or you may not realize why it is that you are still parking in the next county after all those years at that institution. At any rate, they happen to English Department linguists with far too much frequency. We urge English Departments to

to review their treatment of linguists, and where such treatment is found wanting, to ameliorate the situation.

On the other hand, English Department linguists should also examine their status within their departments and encourage fair treatment for both literacy and literature professors. Moreover, they should never, never expect special consideration. They should also look beyond the department to themselves. They should candidly inquire of their alter ego whether they have lived up to their professional standards, whether they have done their professional best for their students, and whether they are indeed real linguists in every sense of the word. To have it otherwise is to cheapen the profession, mislead the English Department (in spite of their foibles), and mislead and undereducate students. The obligation is there--even in the English Department, for if non-linguists can adequately function as English Department linguists, then obviously linguistic training is superfluous. The only difference between the English Department linguist and the "real" linguist should be the circumstances of his employment. Those circumstances can be supportive or they can be trying. But let us bear in mind a quotation which is highly applicable here: "Perchance he for whom this bell tolls may be so ill as that he knows not it tolls for him."

In conclusion let me state that the real thrust of this paper is not the difficulties which the English Department linguist encounters--they are legion--the real thrust is that in spite of such difficulties, standards should not be sacrificed.

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